Introduction

Although I am fully aware of the fact that theories about narration are amongst the least amenable of all modern critical formulations to being summarized, we cannot properly understand the following discussion of the narrative semiotics of drama in general and Sophoclean storytelling in particular without emphasizing some recent crucial developments in the field of narratology.¹ It is commonly accepted that storytelling is an intrinsically human practice.² The same applies to storylistening, storyreading, and storywatching—neologisms which aim to describe the full spectrum of relationships between tellers of tales and their audiences. These newly coined terms form part of a wider set of ideas and proposals intended to explain the special ways in which humans make sense of the world around them through various acts of storytelling. People listen to, read, or watch stories being told in different media and from diverse perspectives. There are indeed cases in which the narrator of the story is either indiscernible or altogether absent. But do not let this one fact escape your notice: there is always an ultimate teller in both narrated and narratorless media, namely the person behind the story, be he the author, the dramatist, or the cinematographer. Much as storytellers of all eras have taken great pains to hide their true identity behind countless personas, or even completely erase it in theatre and cinema, there is always a commanding intelligence pulling the strings and making the story the way it is.³

Further, what is remarkable about stories is that, if recounted effectively, they have the power to capture the imagination of audiences and transport them to another world—in other words they induce an altered state of

¹ On general introductions to narratology, see recently Kindt/Müller (2003); Ryan (2004); Herman/Vervaeck (2005); Jahn (2005); Meister (2005); Phelan/Rabinowitz (2005); Herman (2007); Herman/Jahn/Ryan (2008); Hühn/Pier/Schmid/Schönert (2009); Fludernik (2009).
² See (e.g.) Abbott (2008) 1–12, who notes that ‘[g]iven the presence of narrative in almost all human discourse, there is little wonder that there are theorists who place it next to language itself as the distinctive human trait’ (p. 1).
³ See Markantonatos (2002), who offers a detailed theory of a narratology of drama.
consciousness. It goes without saying that both theatre and cinema have the technological means to create large-scale fictional worlds out of actual and non-actual states and events, thereby engaging audiences in an extraordinary aesthetic and learning experience. This notion is as old as Aristotle, in whose famous treatise the *Poetics* it is a fundamental premise, that there is a natural human propensity towards mimesis: people of all cultures find pleasure in make-believe, because on one level they enjoy artistry and craftsmanship, but on another level they delight in acquiring new knowledge through verbal-visual works of the imagination. These are the basic principles of what has lately become known as storytelling theory, which in its ever growing expansion has come to include all long-established branches of narratology in a comprehensive theoretical proposition aiming at analyzing not only the form and content of verbal and visual tales but also their historical and literary context. In particular, most critics working in the field of modern literary theory today seek to integrate the entire range of narratological methods with aesthetic and ideological critical idioms, bringing a wide variety of viewpoints to bear upon individual works. They make effective use of numerous critical resources such as Old and New Historicism, Anthropology, Sociology, Reception Aesthetics, and Intertextuality in order to deal with the intricate narratological questions raised by the plays. As it now seems better to grapple with the phenomenon of narration more holistically than before, it is fair to suggest that narratology has gradually evolved into a grand theory which aims to characterize and tackle the fiendish complexity of storytelling by offering profound considerations which approach the issue from more than one angle.

Most classicists have become acquainted with these novel theoretical formulations professing to explain the workings of narrative patterns and, more generally, the forces governing the manipulation and dissemination of narrative information in storytelling activities, through the scholarship of Irene de Jong, a Dutch academic expert, who was the first to apply the lessons of traditional narratology to ancient Greek literature, especially Homer’s *Iliad*. Notwithstanding the excessive rigidity of her taxonomy and

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5 See recently Grethlein/Rengakos (2009), who convincingly argue that ‘technical analysis of narrative ought not however to be an end in itself, but needs to be made fruitful for interpretation’ (p. 3).
6 De Jong (1987). But Fusillo (1985) has also a fair claim to be the first, although his narrative analysis of Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica* made little impact on scholarly circles at the time. For a more interesting and readable discussion of Homer’s narrative techniques, see Richardson (1990).